

## **A Brief History of Corn**

Since ancient times, corn has played an integral role in human history. Corn is a grass, native to the Americas. The exact origin of the grain remains unknown, but tiny ears of corn have been discovered at ancient village sites and in tombs of early Native Americans. Evidence of corn in central Mexico suggests it was used there as long as 7,000 years ago, where it was domesticated from wild grass. Cultivated corn is known to have existed in the southwestern U.S. for at least 3,000 years. To the Aztecs and the Incas, corn was a staple of their diet that provided flour and vegetable dishes for their meals. Here in the United States, many of the various Native American tribes have traditionally grown corn – also known as maize – and used it for both food and utilitarian purposes. Corn was so important to some Pueblo tribes of the Southwest that it was considered one of the three sacred foods (along with beans and squash), so sacred that some groups even worshipped it. Indeed, Native American mythology is rich with stories involving corn and important religious events. Many eastern tribes shared their knowledge of corn production with the early European settlers, an act which saved many pioneers from starvation.

## **Uses of Corn**

Along with wheat and rice, corn is one of the world's major grain crops. It is the largest grain crop grown in the U.S. Corn has been used as a foodstuff for humans (about 9 percent of each crop), as well as for livestock (about 64 percent of each crop). Corn has found its way into a wide variety of American foods. These foods include corn kernels, corn meal, and other food products such as: cooking oils, margarine, and corn syrups and sweeteners (fructose), to name a few. Corn is also an excellent source of carbohydrates.

Corn cobs have been used as a soft-grit abrasive and to provide furfural, a liquid required in the manufacturing of nylon fibers. Corn has been used as a source for producing degradable plastics. Additionally, ethanol (a type of renewable fuel made from corn) has shown the possibility of becoming a major "new" fuel for the world's automotive industry. From foods of the past to fuels of the future, this highly diverse crop has played a major role in human civilization.

## **Corn Development and Growth**

As miraculous as the many uses for corn may be, the way corn develops and grows is equally fascinating. A single seed (or kernel) of corn may produce a plant which yields more than 600 kernels of corn per ear. To understand the vast amount of seed produced by corn plants, consider the following example: A single kernel can produce a plant that will contain at least 600 kernels per ear. On one acre of land, anywhere from 22,000 to 35,000 individual plants may be grown. If each plant produces at least one ear of corn the yield will be 13,000,000 kernels of corn from that single acre. (In general, hybrid corn is developed to produce from one to two ears per plant.) A 400-acre farm would then yield over five billion kernels from its production. In addition, consider that U.S. corn yields have increased 125 percent since 1950.